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The Easier Way

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Abstract

I STUCK out my thumb and said, “Michael—you don’t know how it feels to be out here all alone.” Then I stared at the vacant highway. Cold air made me blink. We walked along the shoulder, our boots digging into the gravel...

The Easier Way

by Charlotte Donahey
Journalism, Junior

I STUCK out my thumb and said, "Michael—you don't know how it feels to be out here all alone." Then I stared at the vacant highway. Cold air made me blink. We walked along the shoulder, our boots digging into the gravel.

"All alone, huh?" Michael grunted. He lowered his black, curly head, thrust his hands into his pocket and pouted.

"You know what I mean. My family—they don't know where I am."

Michael shook his head. "Nope."

I looked to see if there was any expression on his face. It was deadpan. I wondered if Michael's family knew where he was. I wondered if he told them.

"Lynn," he said, "the trouble with you is you always need people around. You learn a lot by being alone. Here comes a truck. Stick out your thumb. Those semis always stop for pretty college girls."

I edged up to the road. The rush of the oncoming semi scared me. A "Lay's Potato Chip" truck roared by. "Guess I'm not pretty enough," I said.

Michael's brown eyes followed the truck's New York license plates down the road. "Too bad it didn't stop," he said. "Bet he would take us all the way to Buffalo. Then Canada is just across the bridge."

"Yah," I said. "Too bad." I was glad the truck with the New York plates hadn't stopped.

Michael quickened his stride. "Those Canadian mountains!" he sighed and opened his arms as if to embrace them. "Once we start climbing, no one will ever find us, Lynn."

I stared at Michael. I saw him hiking up a mountain, sitting on a peak with a dried beef sandwich in his hand. I saw him content to have jagged rocks and nesting birds as

his friends. I knew that he saw me beside him on that mountain. But I wasn't there.

"Wonder what my folks will do when they find out we left for Canada," I said.

"Maybe notify the border guards," Michael said, "or the Greenfield police." He laughed. "They'll give up soon. Most parents do."

My parents wouldn't give up, I thought. They would worry. A lot.

Michael kicked a piece of gravel about ten yards. He gazed after it intently, with his head bowed and his long black curls covering his face.

"You know, Michael, (he hated the name Mike) when we get to Buffalo, maybe I'll call home. There's no way I'm going home, but at least I can let them know I'm safe."

"You're gonna mess up everything if you call 'em, Lynn. They'll send the Canadian mounted police down here. I know you—you'll get all blubbery on the phone and they'll pay your fare on the next bus home."

I wondered if he cared. "Perhaps you'll be happier that way," I said. "You can have the mountains all to yourself, you and your rocks and your birds."

His face was deadpan. "Sure," he said. "I don't mind it alone. I just thought you might like the mountains."

I heard a car coming over the hill. "Shall I stick out my thumb, Michael?"

"I don't care. Doesn't even matter if we get to Canada. It's no different than anyplace else I've been. There are too many people everywhere. The world is too crowded."

I stuck out my thumb, but the car passed us by. Michael continued walking, didn't even glance up. I stood beside the road, watching his hunched shoulders, his slim frame shuffling aimlessly down the road.

You're in a different world than me, Michael, I thought. My world is the farm, our horses and my little brother and I playing kickball in the backyard. I had

known Michael for nine months and I didn't even know if he had a little brother.

Chilling air hit my pupils again. Tears filled the edge of my eyes. One spilled over onto my cheek. "Dumb," I said. I cut it off with the palm of my mitten.

Michael turned to me. "What's wrong?" he asked.

"Dumb tear. It's too cold," I said. Michael knew it wasn't that cold and he always got angry when I cried. He gave me an accusing look.

"You always need people around you," he said. "Look, Lynn, forget it. You're a long way from Greenfield, Iowa. You have to cut yourself free. The only way to know yourself is to leave—to get alone.

His voice was pleading but it lacked conviction. Suddenly I wondered why he took me with him if he wanted to be so "all alone."

"But, Michael, how **do** you cut yourself off? How **do** you break free?" I said.

He shrugged his shoulders. "Sometimes people do it for you. Sometimes parents cut the ties. It's easier that way. I'm sure glad it happened that way for me." He paused a moment. "You're gonna go home, aren't you Lynn? Too bad. You'll be losing out."

That was the only goodbye I could expect from Michael.

"Think I'll thumb up to Toronto," he said. "Sometimes truckers don't have room to pick up two people. It'll be easier getting a ride this way. Everything's easier this way." I thought—you would be happy if you could really believe that, Michael.

I crossed the road and stuck out my thumb. I was glad the truck with the New York plates hadn't stopped.